

CAN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY REAWAKEN THE SPIRIT OF ACTION RESEARCH?

Gabriel J. Costello, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology gabrielj.costello@gmit.ie
Chris Taylor, CTC Consulting ctc@iol.ie

The approach of action research (AR) is having considerable influence on management scholarship (Baskerville and Myers 2004; Coghlan and Brannick 2005; Davison et al. 2004; Dick 2002; Mårtensson and Lee 2004; McNiff 2000; Reason and Bradbury 2001a). Action Research (AR) originated from the work of Kurt Lewin during the 1940s and has been summarised as an approach that “combines theory and practice (and researchers and practitioners) through change and reflection in an immediate problematic situation within a mutually acceptable ethical framework” (Avison et al. 1999). The application of AR has not been without controversy particularly in debates with positivist science on the justification and generation of knowledge. These arguments were addressed by Susman & Evered (1978) in their influential description of AR as consisting of a cyclical process involving five phases: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating, and specifying learning. The focus of AR is to address real-life problems through intervention together with the research objective of making a contribution to knowledge. Reason and Bradbury aim to “draw together some of the main threads that form the diverse practices of action research” and propose an almost lofty vision of AR contributing to the world’s wellbeing and sustainability in areas ranging from the economic and political to the psychological and spiritual (Reason and Bradbury 2001b).

The development of theory is a perennial objective, albeit a challenging one, for the management discipline (Chamberlin 1890; Dubin 1976; Dubin 1978; Gregor 2006; Markus and Saunders 2007; Sutton and Staw 1995; Whetten 1989; Wilson 1966). Similarly organisational development has been high on the agenda for those seeking to understand and develop management literature and practice (Cunningham 1993; Schein 1985). Indeed Kurt Lewin is famous for his aphorism that there is “nothing so practical as a good theory”

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is proposed by Cooperrider *et al.* (2008) as a “conceptual reconfiguration of action research” with the twofold objective of the generation of theory and the development of organisations (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Cooperrider and Srivastva 1999). A supporter such as Professor Robert Quinn at University of Michigan argues that AI is “creating a positive revolution in the field of organization development” (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005).

Here is how Hammond (1998) describes AI:

Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system ‘life’ when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to heighten positive potential. It mobilises inquiry through crafting an “unconditional positive question” often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.”

Appreciative Inquiry is not problem solving. A concentration on problems will tend to exaggerate them, and focus our attention exclusively on them. Problems never seem to go away, and grow in importance according to the degree of attention given to them (p 6-7).

Bushe (2007) contends that “ traditional problem solving in organizations has always focused on fixing the broken and bringing the system back to its original stable form but not necessarily broadening its capacity to withstand future organizational pressures” The greatest and most important problems of life cannot be solved; they can only be outgrown. To be outgrown, they need to be replaced by a new, life-giving interest. To find an interest, we need to be energized by a powerful, life giving vision.

Figure 1 describes the appreciative inquiry cycle consisting of four stages:

- Discover the "best of what is"— identification of where an organisation’s processes worked perfectly.
- Dream "what might be —they envisioned processes that would work perfectly all the time.
- Design "what should be"—define and prioritize the elements of perfect processes.
- Create a Destiny based on "what will be"—participation in the creation of the design.

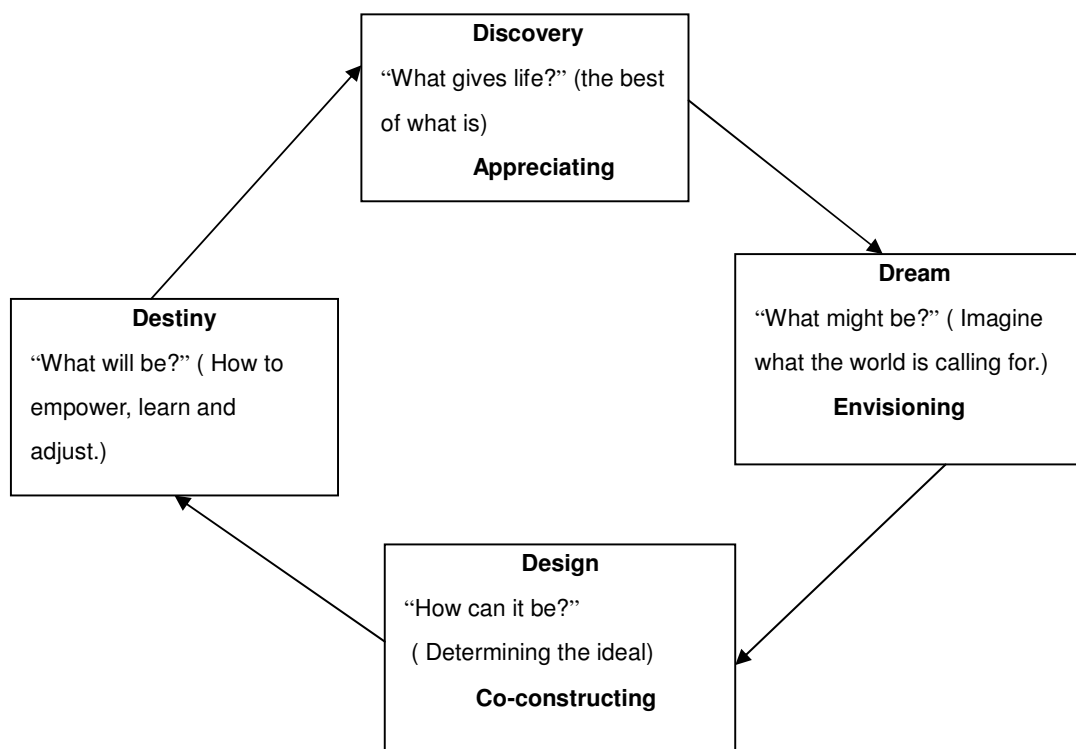


Fig 1: The Appreciative Inquiry Cycle

Cooperrider *et al.* (2008) are very critical of the development of action research: contending that it has “largely failed as an instrument for advancing social knowledge of consequence” (p. 353) with the potential of AR being limited by its “romance with *action* at the expense of *theory*” (p. 354). Furthermore they contend that the discipline of action research has made a sharp distinction between theory and practice to the detriment of the role of theory. They lament the

situation where action research “is becoming increasingly inconsequential” paradoxically in a research environment where it has a significant opportunity to contribute (p. 356).

They have the objective of bringing action-research beyond what they call a “secularized problem solving frame” as follows (p. 355):

- By treating theory as an enabler of social transformation
- By replacing the predominantly problem-orientated view of action research with an affirmative form of inquiry
- Synthesising the previous points by providing a conceptual underpinning of AI

They place their schema within the movement in management research from the mechanistic approach of logical positivism to what they term as a “socio-rationalist” theoretical approach. They lament the assault (sic) by practitioners (seeking problem solving) and academics (replicating the mechanistic scientific view) on “creative theorizing” (p 357).

The work is presented in the context of practitioner engagement with an Irish healthcare operator called Home Instead Senior Care (HomeInstead 2012). The organisation provides home care for senior citizens that include services such as personal care, meal preparation, light housekeeping and companionship. Home Instead has 18 offices in Ireland, employs over 1500 people, and has provided a range of home care services to over 3,000 seniors since it was established in the country in 2005. Home Instead builds a personalised care program that is tailored to specific needs, lifestyles and preferences and which is delivered within the home. Each Home Instead Senior Care office is independently owned and operated.

This overall objective of the research is to address the following question: *how does the approach of appreciative inquiry translate into an Irish health sector context?* The study will also aim to develop theory appropriate to this sector and explore the contention that AI can reawaken the approach of action research.

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